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A D D R E S S

TO THE

GRADUATING CLASS

OF THE

College of Physicians and Surgeons,

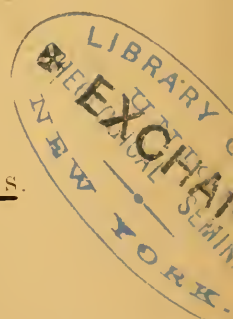
AT THEIR

ANNUAL COMMENCEMENT,

MARCH 1st, 1871.

BY

CHARLTON T. LEWIS.



Published by Request of the Faculty of the College.

NEW YORK:

PRINTED BY THE NEW YORK PRINTING COMPANY,

205, 207, 209, 211, AND 213 EAST TWELFTH STREET.

1871.

medicine - C. M. Jones

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THE PROFESSIONAL SPIRIT AND SCIENTIFIC MEDICINE.

YOUNG GENTLEMEN who now enter the medical profession: Your successful course of study has qualified you to enjoy a display of the profound ignorance of the laity in the mysteries of your art; and I have been invited, I suppose, as "the most senseless and fit person" to make that display. In order that it may not be painful as well as amusing, I think it well to take my stand on the outer wall of your profession, and address you in the name of the general public,—the outside barbarians, who have never taken the oath of Hippocrates, however our dangers or our fears may often have driven us to sacrifice his favorite fowl to Æsculapius. At the risk of saying a foolish thing, and subject to correction by the wise heads around me, I propose to argue that there ought to be no such thick, high wall as there is around the profession of medicine; to plead in behalf of the people at large, who want to get nearer to you and know more about your business; in short, to make some suggestions upon the exaggerations of the professional spirit in scientific medicine.

For we think there is a tendency in your schools to bar us out. You, gentlemen, are made physicians to-day; and "physician" means "student of nature." It is a great name—a symbol of all that is successful and glorious in the history of mind. But it is a comprehensive name, too; and a medical practitioner who is really a physician, may be said, in the words of Bacon, to have taken all knowledge for his province. Now, this is not consistent with the exclusiveness of the ancient medical men. They used all the arts of priestcraft to conceal the secrets of their school, and to keep its learning apart from that of the world. The healing art was made mysterious and awful in itself; it was associated with

solemn movements, with strange ceremonies, with a loud-sounding dialect which meant nothing to the uninitiated, and thus it imposed on them, as far greater than it was. This policy did not always succeed perfectly. Everybody remembers the Scripture story of King Asa, who "was diseased in his feet, until his disease was exceeding great, yet in his disease he sought not unto the Lord, but unto the physicians." And after saying that he "sought unto the physicians," the simple chronicler at once adds, "and Asa slept with his fathers," as if that were the natural consequence. It would seem that throughout the ancient world there were many people who agreed with him.

But in spite of the failure of this imposing policy, let me candidly ask you whether tradition has not preserved some traces of it in the profession? To the unregulated mind of an outside observer it seems so. When we hear medical men translating simple thoughts into Latinized jargon; when an eminent London lecturer advises his class to amuse or deceive sane patients with pretended treatment, *pilulæ panis albi* and the like; when simple folk are sent off to druggists with mysterious abbreviations and hieroglyphies in a prescription, such as *Mel. despumat.*, or *Sacchar. Alb. 3j.*; *Aq. distillat. ʒ ij.*; when a practitioner cannot tell a mother whether her child has croup or not, but is inclined to hope that the laryngitis will not assume a pseudo-membraneous character; we cannot but suspect that the exclusiveness of the *Asclepiadæ* is not yet quite obsolete.

All this is far from being applicable to you, gentlemen, or to the spirit of your profession here. But it is the coarse and vulgar form of a professional Pharisaism which has its finer aspects, and these are found everywhere. They are not merely supported by custom and tradition, but by the nature of your science. This is made up of infinite details, and the close study of detailed knowledge tends to crowd broad results out of the mind, and even to produce a contempt for them. Especially does the practice of medicine teach that general rules are bad guides. The physician finds himself hampered and embarrassed by the vague notions of medicine which laymen pick up in their reading, and circulate in society; and so tends to draw more and more strictly the line which bounds the esoteric learning of his tribe.

This reticence is natural, therefore, and in part unavoidable. But I want to show you that it is one of those limitations of your science which is to be struggled against, not fostered. The specialization of knowledge, for purposes of investigation, must be reconciled with the great cause of the diffusion of knowledge, which is the education of the world.

Now this can be done, for it has been done in other branches of science. Here is a layman's experience. When we meet an engineer, an inventor, a naturalist, we find him eager to tell us all he can of his art. The foremost of these men stand in popular lecture-rooms, giving the broad outlines of their knowledge to the public. Your mystery is the only one on which a popular lecture is unheard of, and would be monstrous. It is the least communicative, and the least in contact with public opinion, of all the professions. Is it said that any attempt to spread medical knowledge abroad would be but to multiply quackery, and would lead incompetent men rashly to practise on themselves and others that vague half-knowledge which is the worst form of ignorance? I answer that it is ignorance that is your obstacle now; it is ignorance that makes the vulgar mind run to quacks and pretenders, and distrust true science; and is your remedy to be more ignorance? To cure darkness by excluding light—to cure folly by shutting out wisdom, is a shining instance of homœopathic practice. The state of the popular mind shows the results. Law is studied in schools, and freely discussed everywhere, and the public understand it well enough not to practise it. Listen to the people's proverbs. They say, "A man who tries his own cause has a fool to his client." If they understood medicine as well, they would feel and say, as they do not now, "The man who doctors himself has a fool to his patient." But what they do say is to disparage your skill, and tell us absurdly that "every man at forty is a fool or a physician."

The same atmosphere of professional exclusiveness once surrounded all learning, but it has now passed away from most branches. The astrologer dealt in signs and wonders, but the great truths of astronomy have become part of the common stock of school-boy learning and popular literature. Yet the people in general know that they cannot predict eclipses or discover aste-

roids, nor do they listen to ignorant pretenders with new and wild theories. The better any science is known to the public mind, the more that mind clings to and trusts the real masters of the science. During the first fifty years of this century, nearly every branch of science was cultivated in an exclusive spirit, by special students, as a separate school; and there was no brotherhood among them, much less any approach to the popular mind. But the last twenty years are a new epoch in science—that of broad generalizations—that of clear vision—that of brilliant results to be stamped forever on the common intelligence. The conservation of force, the doctrine of natural selection binding all animated nature together, the associational theory of mental action, are instances of splendid efforts in this direction. The discoveries of spectrum analysis make astronomy, chemistry, and optics all one study. The uniform theory of geology links it inseparably not only with chemistry, physics, and astronomy, but with natural history and with the science of man.

Now medicine, as a science, is in its nature a sort of centre and rallying-point for all other sciences. It is in a sense all human knowledge, and demands from every other branch its best contributions. From chemistry up the hierarchy of thought to psychology, and from the arithmetical collection of statistics and reckoning of probabilities up to the profoundest problems of social organization and morals, there is no sound true knowledge that is not in some way tributary to it. And yet, while in all these branches the spirit of inquiry has spread through the world, and humanity itself feels that they are working with it in their struggles, scientific medicine has, in a large degree, to fight its own battles, in an age which less than half appreciates it, and which often seems ready to listen to its most vulgar and incompetent rivals. Now the time is coming for medicine to assert its place in the popular mind as a teacher of truth, no less established, no less instructive, and even more interesting, than that taught by any of its sisters or handmaidens.

This is desirable for larger reasons than I can more than hint at here. Already the union of the sciences as teachers of the people has revolutionized modern thought. Metaphysics were the highest study of men for many ages; shaped their religious

belief and inspired their views of Nature; but the sciences have overthrown metaphysics. Even thirty years ago, Kant, Schelling, Hegel, were the lords of the world of mind; but who hears of them now? They had to be destroyed in order to prepare the way for a truer, richer philosophy, which must control future thought; but that philosophy is not yet established, and cannot be, unless medical science furnishes the materials. The metaphysics never made a step towards it. The human mind has but one mode of discovering new truth—induction from particular facts. Not perceiving this, the metaphysicians for ages turned round and round in their own treadmill. While exact science has been steadily advancing, with “Let there be light” upon her banners, and ever new worlds of daring thought adding their glory to her train, the halls of metaphysics stand to this day a mere circus for the showy wrestling of mental athletes. The mind which seeks for truth by metaphysical methods, amid the surer training of this age, is gathering it by a lame footman, while his neighbors use the telegraph. He makes his mental journeys on the old blind horse speculation, who finds his own way without a rein over the boundless heath, while the rest of the world is rushing and whistling by on paths of iron demonstration, with the chained forces of Nature as attendants.

But shall Philosophy be abandoned? Is there to be no organizing principle for human thought? That which has seemed to make all truth worth striving for, the hope of a highest truth to be its sum and goal, that hope has been the pole-star of Earth’s bravest and best minds, and must we turn our backs on it forever? Philosophy, the gorgeous dream of Plato, the grim sport of Kant, the ideal love of Schelling, the dearest faith of Coleridge—is it all in vain? No, Philosophy shall still be sought and found. By the touch of her guiding hand and the impulse of her voice we know her near, and know that the crown is on her brow and the glory in her smile, though our eyes lack the anointing and cannot see. She leads us to the threshold of a temple vaster than the world, with room within for the soaring of the loftiest mind, for the expansion of the enthusiast’s soul. She tells us that its shrines are rich with the spoils of infinite beauty, and bright with gems of enduring truth; and that we may enter, and

all these shall be ours, if we but read well two words which she has graven in the cold marble above. Painfully we climb; we feel for the letters like the blind; we trace in them forms we know; the Gamma, the Theta, the Sigma of our boyish tasks are here. The words are familiar; every school-boy has read them, and every nation made them household words; but to the piercing eye of our guide, her GNOTHI SEAUTON is still unread, and we are still groping at the threshold.

But not forever. All science is the path to a new Philosophy. All methods of discovery tried in other branches of knowledge are making ready for transfer to a higher work, and transfiguration by a higher truth. And your branch, gentlemen, has its large share in this future. The fall of the metaphysician is the call for the physician. It is in nervous physiology, in the mechanics of thought and life, in the observation of morbid states of the brain, and of the whole body as connected with it, and in the records of medical jurisprudence and of lunatic asylums, that Psychology in the future is to find its most fruitful materials and its surest guides. The importance of the study of insanity in the general science of mind, and therefore in that of method, has not yet begun to be understood by the world, and cannot be until physicians have taught the world that man and Nature are not degraded, but elevated, by whatever brings them nearer together; that there is nothing unworthy of human nobleness in measuring the speed with which the will sends its messages along the nerves, the speed of the epileptic *aura* from some distant nerve-centre to the brain, the amount of phosphates produced by an hour's hard thinking; until, in short, physicians take their place more distinctly in that great body of seekers for truth who know no profession but her service, and wear no badge but her name.

Your profession has already made most splendid contributions to the common stock of intelligence, and has acted powerfully on the general mind; but it has sometimes done so in spite of the professional spirit, and not by its direct influence. When the father of comparative anatomy, William Harvey, sat with Charles I. under a hedge at Edgehill, and, with the bullets flying around them, read to the King his strange new views of the action of the heart, and how the arteries are not arteries, or air-tubes, at

all, but part of the circle of the blood, he did not dream of ever doing more than to convince the first men of his age and of his own profession. But to-day that wonderful circuit of life is part of the common consciousness of men. And so it will be with many of your own professional mysteries. The general nature of so-called local morbi actions; the asthenic character of fever and inflammation; the value of hypodermic injections in administering certain drugs; the proper uses and limits of anæsthesia; these great landmarks in the growth of practical medicine will become part of the common knowledge of intelligent men. Why is it that the same eminent teachers, who in the class-room magnify the importance of hygienic therapeutics, have been known to go out to the people, and, by their practice at least, to encourage the superstition that the whole of therapeutics consists in giving doses? Why, is it that the public are not yet able to understand how utterly without value is all the popular testimony to the efficacy of particular drugs, and that no two cases can ever be compared together to any purpose without a scientific diagnosis of each? Why, but because the traditions of the profession shut it in from the communion it ought to have with the mind of the world?

The loss of power by this means is seen in the fact that the noblest triumphs of your profession hitherto have been gained, not within its own bounds, but beyond them; not in the sporadic saving of individuals here and there, but in the sweeping preservation of communities: through the power of public opinion, controlled by your influence on the popular mind. What has medicine done for modern society? Far more than is commonly dreamed of. Statistics show that the average duration of life in great cities has more than doubled within two centuries. In former ages, Europe was desolated by pestilences; one of which, the black death of 1347, is credibly computed to have left behind it twenty-five millions of dead—one-fourth of the whole population. But the common wants of air, food, and cleanliness are now too well understood and met, in all the ways of life, for such a disaster to humanity to recur; and it is to the medical profession the world owes this change. The precious store the physicians carry down the ages leaks on every side, and filters through thought

and custom, transforming our lives. The single discovery of Jenner, taught and practised by enlightened physicians until it is a social law, has doubtless saved more lives, and contributed more to the wealth and happiness of mankind, than all the direct treatment of disease by all the physicians that ever lived.

So it is with the triumphs that await medicine in the future. Why are there sects and schools in this community, which aim to rival scientific medicine in popular favor, and even to drive it from the field? It is because of the very ignorance among the people which your professional exclusiveness fosters. You withhold from them the very means of judging your claims, and understanding your value. I have heard within two weeks, in a large company of intelligent people, a serious discussion of the pretended curative power in the will of a quack, applied by manipulations of diseased organs. Such a fact seems to me to be a reproach to the physicians of the community. If they had done their full duty in the education of the people, we should hear no more of Mesmeric doctors, vegetable Eclectics, dilute potencies, and patented panaceas. These things would have gone to their own place in the limbo of amulets, horoscopes, and witchcraft. To drive all these superstitions from the world is a worthy task for a noble science; but it must be done by diffusing knowledge, not by wrapping it in mystery.

Your skill will always be best appreciated where the nature of it is best understood. To vulgar ignorance, the optical account of the microscope explains all the discoveries it has made, and more; and the boor does not doubt that if he had the instrument he could make them all. He is like the man who, when asked if he could play the violin, answered, "I suppose I could; I never tried." But the man who has tried, and who knows how much skill of hand and eye and how much contrivance go into its most common manipulations, is the man to honor and trust your microscopic diagnosis. He who appreciates the extent and variety of your materia medica, and has learned something of chemistry, and of the strange changes in physiological effects often produced by combining elements, is the man intelligently to admire your art in devising an elaborate formula. Thus the appreciation of

your patients, and your fees too, will grow with the medical education of the community.

But I wish it were in my power adequately to set before you the higher motive. Your science is, in an important sense, the mother of the sciences ; for the desire to be saved from death was the first and is still the mightiest motive power in scientific investigation. It makes all other studies tributary, and so is an avenue to them all. It is essential to its worth that it be pursued in a scientific spirit ; in the spirit that looks upwards as well as downwards ; that keeps in view the largest truth as well as the smallest fact. This spirit finds its satisfaction less even in the successes of the moment than in their relations to the larger successes and interests of the truth out of which they grow. And, to feel this, the physician must be more than an executive officer in the hierarchy of thought ; more than a dispenser of the bounty and skill others have accumulated ; he must be a **DISCOVERER**.

If I might assume to advise the humblest youth entering on the struggle for a livelihood by the healing art, I would say to him, Select at once some subject of inquiry in your profession which interests you, and which the ablest teachers have not made clear to you ; and carry it with you night and day. Seek everywhere for the facts and laws bearing on it, and keep them systematically recorded. This work will not hinder success in practice, but will give you power in every department. Follow the investigation, if it take years, until you have solved the problem, and can distinctly move one step forward, in some direction, the boundaries of science. Make yourself a specialist in something, however small ; but link your specialty on all sides with the broader aims and work of your life. Then will the accuracy of observation, the patience in waiting, the closeness of thought, the comprehensiveness of view, which every original research imperatively forces on the inquirer, come to characterize all that you do, and every case will be handled by you in the masterly spirit of a scientific discoverer. It is not superior genius, nor greater opportunities for study, nor more leisure, that has given to Germany the leadership of the world in contemporary medicine ; it is precisely this habit, diffused everywhere through the profession there, of mining constantly, in whatever grounds, for the new truth that lies buried.

I know the obstacles in the way : difficulties external, now in the claims of active business, now in the want of books and of opportunities to observe ; difficulties internal, in self-distrust, in weariness, in want of precise early discipline, in the discouraging memory of failures. But these are but limitations, which, whether you can do it or not, you must try to overleap. What if you fail again and always ? It is the effort to master these that has accomplished all greatness. It is impossibilities that have always been the opportunities for splendid achievements. For ages men searched the heavens for human fates inscribed in stars around the great throne. They failed, but they gave birth to astronomy. It is in your science and its kindred branches especially that failures have been constantly the keys of triumph. The long, persistent hunt for the philosopher's stone was the source of our chemistry. The endless toil of the laboratory to find the panacea, gave its *materia medica* to medicine. These men kept seeking always for the truth of which they felt the most urgent need ; they failed, but they built better than they knew, and such failures are the guides and the glories of the coming on of time.

See how the progress of medicine has defied its limitations. When the greatest mind that ever wrote wished to point out with emphasis the helplessness of science before our wants, and to mock and humble your art, what task did he set before it ?

“ Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased ?
 Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow ?
 Rase out the written troubles of the brain,
 And, with some sweet oblivious antidote,
 Cleanse the stuff'd bosom of that perilous grief
 That weighs upon the heart ? ”

Since this was impossible, he cried :

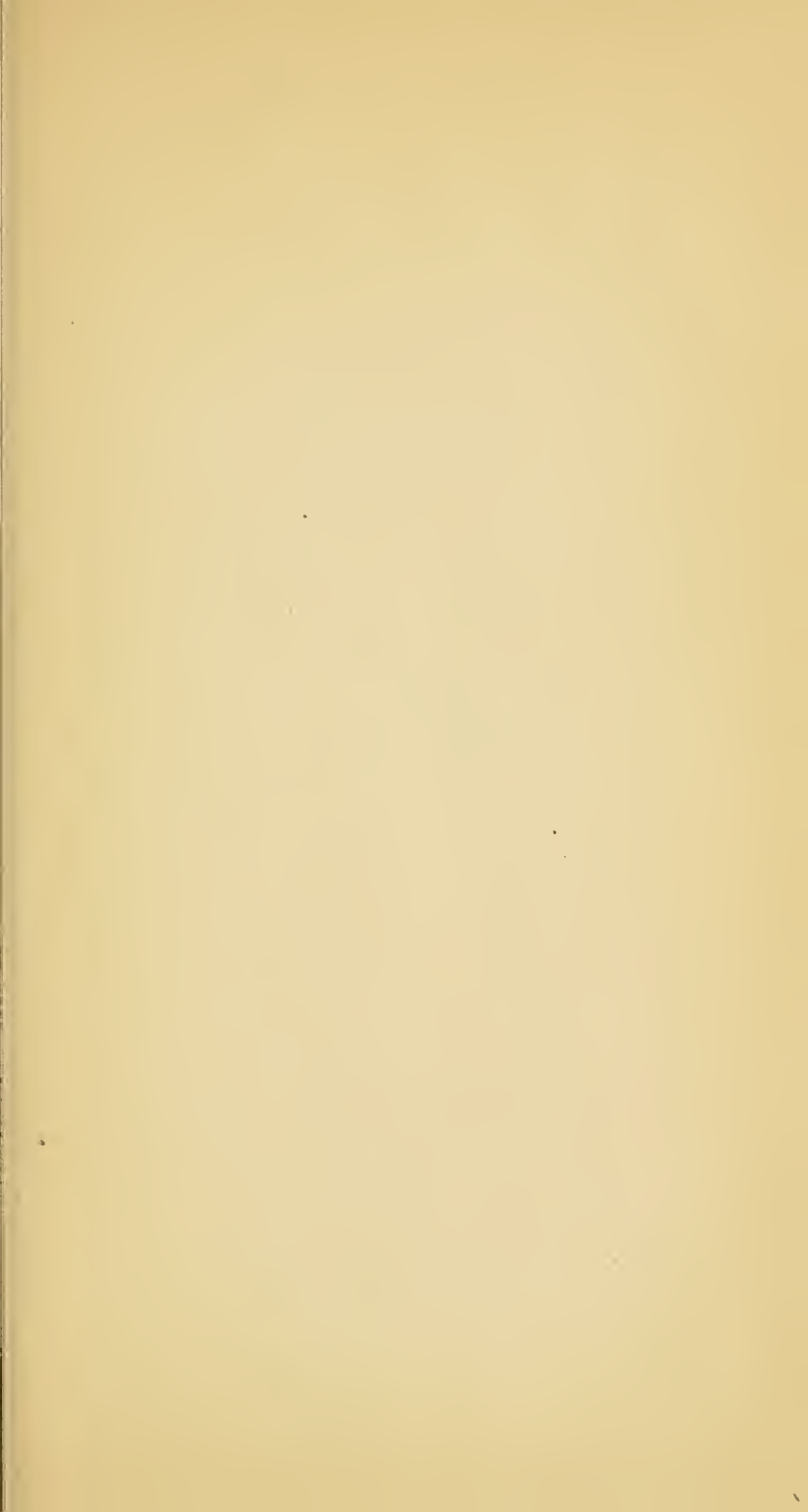
“ Throw physic to the dogs ! I'll none of it.”

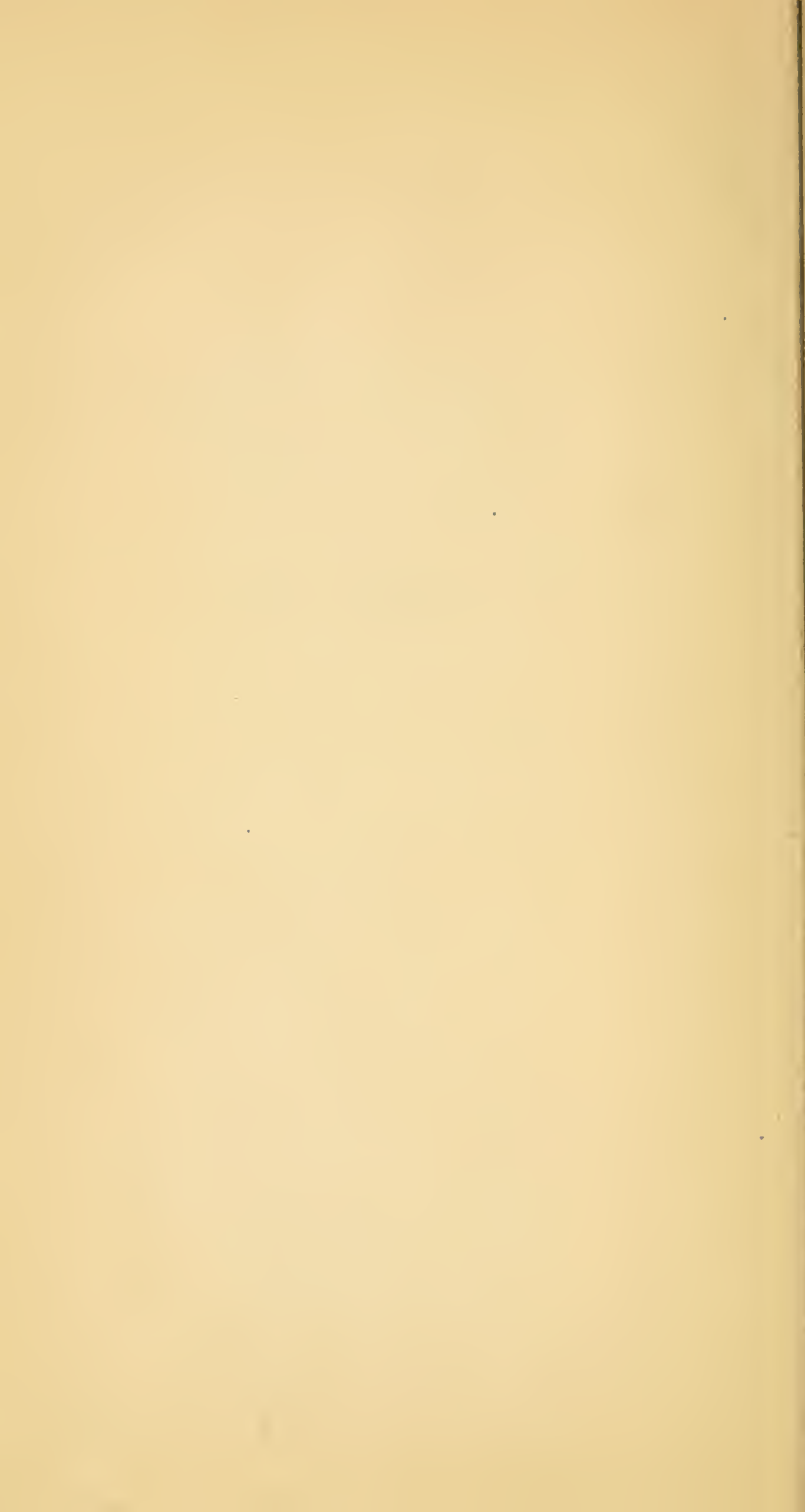
But to-day the ministry of the diseased mind is in every asylum ; the written troubles are rased from the brain in the daily work of every physician, and the sweet oblivious antidote stands soothingly ready at every bedside. What imagination is bold enough now to outdo Shakspeare, and to fix the limits of the possible in your future progress ?

It is in this view of your profession, gentlemen, that we of the outside world would come to press our claims upon you, and to ask for closer communion with your intellectual work. And it is in this aspect, too, that your work will find its best inspiration. It lifts the human race, and the horizon of man is enlarged. You take with you from this school not only the lessons, but the influence and example of more than one man, whose scientific labors are a model for your own; more than one Columbus of the world of mind, who, with his yearning for truth as a compass, has put forth on the immeasurable voyage in search of new continents of knowledge. True, the work is never finished; what is to be done is the more arduous by what is accomplished; and that which the poet calls "artistry's haunting curse, the incomplete," is on our intellectual work forever. But worthy pursuit is itself the crown of enjoyment, and turns this curse into a blessing. Every step which enlarges the field of the known spreads vaster the veil of the unknown,—in the words of a great physician, "the larger the world of light, the larger the circle of darkness that surrounds it." Not political history alone, but mind has a West to which the star of empire moves; but it does not, like our measured planet, complete its course and stand in its old place again. Here no sun, forever returning on its path, tells a daily tale of limitation, and rounds the cycle of possible achievement at its starting-point; for our world is the infinite, and its lights are "thoughts that wander through eternity." The explorer looks for no end, even in the happy isles, and among the great he once has known; to him all personal ends sink more and more in the great pursuit before him, and going forth, with all his conscious weaknesses upon him, to bear the light of mind into the abysses of darkness, he cheerfully sings :

"But blind or lame, or sick or sound,
We follow that which flies before;
We know the merry world is round,
And we may sail for evermore."







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